

From a Vertical Structure to a Horizontal Map

The Map and Work Processes

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Rarely is the word “organization” directly linked to terms like “customer” or “process,” even though customers and processes define the life of an organization. The organizational structure is formally arranged vertically, while customers and processes constitute the horizontal and dynamic essence of organizing. Let’s focus all our attention on the process toward the customer or target group using a “land-map” as a tool. How does that work? Experiences and examples.

Hierarchical management or management based on the land-map

The organizational structure consists of hierarchy and functionality. There are hierarchical layers, and within them are various functional units. Everyone is in a box, has a role, and a place in the scheme. We may be accustomed to this from time immemorial, assuming that for centuries the invisible world was depicted as hierarchical and functional.

However, if we start with a customer and a process that shapes the organization, we can better depict the organization as a land-map. Showing the Netherlands as a map with cities, villages, waterways, streets, and squares gives you an impression of where everything fits into the bigger picture. The land-map shows the quality of the connections

How do we draw the map of an organization? Sketch and name the units, teams, individuals, and paths that are passable and connect. In this way, we discover how the various components are arranged in a good or poor balance. Sometimes there are rarely used main roads alongside which busy dirt paths or elephant trails have emerged without official status.

On the map, we can indicate which units focus on customers and suppliers, which units work internally—such as HR and finance—and which teams provide internal services. How far apart are these units? Some are close together, while others are on the periphery and far removed from the central activity. The map of the here and now shows us where there are bottlenecks, where the traffic jams are, but also where the process flows and yields good results. The map as a whole represents the company. Within it are units, and within the units we see teams at work, within which individuals are working.

We can observe that certain units are too large and unwieldy, that there are teams that do not operate as a team and fail to maintain connections with other teams.

Example 1

Similarly, a certification service organization in which several large units with many specialists form a structure that is difficult to manage. Client assignments are distributed among the professionals in a rather arbitrary manner. Focus on results and financial health is also weak. Management decides to work with small teams that serve their own market segment and are given responsibility for the results and the smooth running of the work

process. Each team has a team leader whose task is to manage the team process with their colleagues. Management also consists of a small team that acts as a coach for the working teams, client teams, and internal teams. Very quickly, a greater sense of dynamism becomes noticeable; the professionals are pleased with this change, as it gives them more leeway. Teams can focus on client needs as well as on their professional working methods.

The map shows us the “red spots” in the social interactions taking place within the infrastructure. Instead of sweeping functional reorganizations, we can achieve a better-functioning whole through small shifts. It is primarily the work processes that suffer from an imperfect map in which relationships are disrupted.

Example 2

In a hospital, various processes are not functioning well; there is conflict between some departments; and the dual management of units is functioning poorly. Several attempts have been made to improve the situation; training sessions were conducted, but the results were insufficient, and the same issues soon resurfaced. In a conversation with the director, we examined several specific issues, such as the lack of cooperation among some specialists and two departments that were not working together, all at the expense of the patients. The emergency room was chronically understaffed and increasingly stagnating, much to the frustration of general practitioners and patients.

I suggested laying the map on the floor of his spacious office. Using a traditional organizational chart, sheets with the names of departments were arranged in constantly shifting configurations. It soon became clear that the grouping of departments had become historically entangled and that many “bottlenecks” had arisen. After the red spots were identified, a new map was creatively laid out, significantly improving the relationships between the departments.

In this hospital, dual leadership was established for each unit. A doctor and a manager jointly formed the leadership team. This could function well, but in many cases, that collaboration did not work out. Time and again, conflicting interests between doctors and managers emerged, requiring constant intervention from higher-ups. In a process involving doctors and managers, the roadmap was redrawn, and the issues requiring improvement were defined.

Each leadership duo formulated its own improvement plan, and decisive action was then taken to address weaknesses in the organization. Support departments such as human resources and finance were also scrutinized, and there was significant potential for improvement in how processes were designed and decisions were made.

During these improvement processes within the context of the new roadmap, patient care was also addressed. It turned out that quite a few patients were staying in the hospital for reasons that were unclear. The CEO organized an early Monday morning meeting to discuss patient cases with an unclear status and make decisions that were implemented in collaboration with those involved, including general practitioners.

The map and the work processes

Instead of a vertical structure that actually says nothing about how things actually work, it is better for management to draw a horizontal map within which the processes that matter take place. Processes that are poorly designed and that operate in a stagnant manner cause headaches, frustration, and dissatisfaction for the people working within such a process.

Instead of lecturing people on how to function better, it makes more sense to examine the workflow to see how it unfolds.

In doing so, we identify the bottlenecks that hinder the work. With improvement ideas and sometimes a radical redesign of the workflow, many unpleasant situations can be prevented.

A work process must have flow, cause no waste, prevent time loss, enable good collaboration, and, not least, provide fulfillment for the people involved because the process is meaningful and serves others well.

Example 3

A somewhat strange situation arose at the hospital mentioned earlier. One of the surgeons had to be admitted himself for surgical treatment. From the very first moment in the process to the very last, there were countless irritating shortcomings in how the surgeon was treated as a patient. His conclusion was that, as a patient, he had to steer the process himself if he wanted it to proceed with any degree of satisfaction. Afterward, this surgeon wrote a friendly message to the management regarding everything that did not function well for him as a client of his own hospital. This provided a wealth of useful material for improvements in every possible way. In particular, the intake, diagnosis, and administrative processing of patients resulted in a great deal of uncertainty and waiting time for the patient.

As a result of this situation, an experiment was conducted to streamline the diagnosis, administrative processing, treatment, and follow-up care for a patient/client—all within an hour. This led to the fragmentation across functions, departments, and areas of expertise being bridged by a clear process that was designed and implemented across units. This was feasible in 80% of cases. For the 20% of complex cases, a different pathway was established. Emergency care for accidents was also strengthened, and the workflow was successfully improved. Clients and general practitioners were surprised and amazed that this was suddenly possible. Within the hospital, it was observed that this brought much greater peace of mind to the treating staff and their support teams.

Service-oriented organizations

Service-oriented organizations in particular, which have a more extensive infrastructure across a wide area, benefit from this approach. Creating the map and reviewing the process the customer goes through provides deeper insight into where things are working and where the balance is disrupted. Drawing the map, identifying red spots, reviewing and improving processes is, in essence, a regular necessity for a well-functioning organization in which the client is at the center and the organizational community can carry out its tasks in a meaningful way.

In conclusion

Finally, a few more aspects of mapping and improving processes.

The top is not at the very top but is located in the center of the map. Around the top, units have a clear place within the whole.

Within the units, teams operate: customer teams, subject-matter teams, and service teams. In an appropriate manner, teams and units can undergo a development that is meaningful for the customer and for the community.

Vision and policy can be communicated effectively because the paths are clear and the routes are accessible. Employees are part of teams where individual and collective tasks can be carried out with purpose.

Every unit and every team has a leader who guides the functioning of the team and unit, creates favorable conditions, and can guide the team in its development with aligned objectives and policy principles.

Units and teams are given the tools and metrics to steer their own course and to implement improvements independently.

A customer-focused, vibrant community, collaborating within well-functioning processes and focused on desired outcomes, is achievable. With a clear view of the big picture, small changes can have a significant impact on the smooth operation of processes and collaboration. This also prevents the need for complex reorganizations along hierarchical lines.

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